

Sermon For: 2/03/19

Scripture: Jer 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Cor 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

“And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in prophet’s hometown.””

Perhaps you have heard the axiom, “familiarity breeds contempt.” It is from one of Aesop’s fables. It may be a little easier to understand if we replace contempt with something like boredom or indifference. To put it another way, the more familiar we become with someone, the more likely we are to believe we have figured them out. And I think we can all find examples of that in our lives.

It can happen in nearly any setting. At work, we have our boss figured out. Before we even say anything, we can guess how they will respond to a new proposal, suggestion, or idea. It happens at home, in relationships, and in marriages. Right after a person we are close to starts talking, we already know what they are going to say. We know the end of the sentence before they even get to the verb.

This is not necessarily done with contempt, it is just a habit we form. We may not even know we are doing it. But after a while, we start to tune out, we stop listening. And if we are on the receiving end of this treatment, we may even stop trying.

Basically, we are taking someone for granted. We have put them in a box and put a label on it. And when we have someone in a labeled box, it is difficult for our opinion of them to change. They no longer have the ability to surprise us and we have lost the ability to learn from them. That is when the relationship stops growing.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus returns to His hometown, Nazareth. It is where He lived for most of His 30 years before He began His public life. We know very little about this period in His life. But 25 plus years is a long time, especially in a small village like Nazareth, in an era where people frequently lived their entire lives in the village, they were born in. These people had a lot of time to form an opinion about Jesus.

So, while it is easy to react with scorn to the Nazoreans’ reaction when Jesus returns to preach in His home town synagogue, it is not that hard to see how it could happen. Imagine them saying, “Isn’t this Jesus, the carpenter? Joseph’s son? The one who would not marry? Didn’t he live with his mother until just a year ago? I don’t remember him ever doing much? How could he be so special?”

They were familiar with the Jesus they knew. They already had Him figured out. They had put Him in a box, with a label, and that label did not say “Prophet, Healer, Miracle worker or Fulfiller of the ancient prophecies.” Basically, they took Him for granted. What could they learn from Him? How could they do this? How could His neighbors and family fail to see that if there was ever a person who you could not put in a box and slap a label on, it would be Jesus of Nazareth. If there was anyone with an ongoing ability to surprise, to teach us something new every time we heard Him, it would be Jesus of Nazareth.

But the people of Nazareth, His neighbors and family members, never really gave Jesus a chance. They had already formed their opinions of Him before He opened His mouth. They stopped listening before they ever really started. Shame on them and their lack of faith. Of course, it is very different for us. We would never do that. Right?

When many of us were introduced to Jesus, we were told from the start that He was much more than a carpenter, even more than a prophet. We were told, He is the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior. And, rather than ignoring Him, we listened and continue to listen every day, every week.

Unlike the Nazoreans, we would never put Jesus in a box. Would we? Unfortunately, it happens all the time. We do it without even realizing it. The Nazoreans thought they had Him figured out because they had 30 years to watch Him as their neighbor. But we have over 2000 years to study a few hundred pages written about Him by His followers. We still have the same pages. Surely, we have Him down by now? We had literally “heard it all before.” Oh, this parable. I have heard it a hundred times. I know this story, I know what is coming next. Just as those who think they know the end of the sentence and stop listening, we too can stop listening to Jesus, without realizing we are doing it. We put Him in a box. This one is labeled Savior, Messiah, Son of God. But it is still a box. And just like that, our relationship with Him suffers. We stop learning. And worst of all we stop being surprised.

The wonder that is Christ is that no matter how many times we have heard about Him, read about Him, talked about Him, He still has unlimited capacity to surprise us. As the saying goes, “God’s other name is surprise.” We just need to be open, and not just with our ears, but with our hearts and minds as well.

Maybe we are perfectly comfortable with the Jesus we know and the message He has for us. It can be really easy to just stay where we are. After all, if we open ourselves up to experiencing Him in a new way, there is always a risk that we may not be comfortable with it. Is it worth the effort? Is it worth the risk? There is a lot to be said for leaving well enough alone. But if we do that, we are missing so much. As His disciples, we are called to do more than simply study His words, we

are called into a relationship with Christ, an ongoing relationship. And part of being in a relationship is staying open, open to listening, open to being surprised. My own experience is that to be surprised by Christ is a wonderful and joyous thing. If not, I would not be sober and definitely would not be a deacon.

How can we open ourselves up, and give Jesus a chance to surprise us? Maybe the best way to allow Christ to surprise us is to see Him in more places. In the faces of the people we meet. Or standing right behind the person we are talking to, smiling at us. This may not only open us up to being surprised by Christ, but it can have the added benefit of making us more attentive to the person we are supposed to be listening to. It is harder to take someone for granted when our Lord is standing right behind them.

Hearing Jesus anew, seeing Him anew, allowing Him to surprise us again, may lead us to a new understanding of something that eluded us before. It may cause us to wonder whether the answer we thought we had safely filed away in our Jesus box is the whole story. And that is okay too. Honestly, I do not think Jesus wants us to figure Him out. He simply wants us to love Him. He wants a relationship with us. And that is harder to do from inside a box, even if it has all the right labels on it.

So open that Jesus box again and see what's there. SURPRISE!

Amen!